

NOT THEIR MOTHER'S DAUGHTER:
AMERICAN CIVILIAN WOMEN'S
ROLE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

The University of Utah

August 2014

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The University of Utah Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

American women who came of age in the 1960s grew up during the era of Cold War and containment. During this time, Americans turned to the family for a sense of security against communism. The belief was that if the home were secure, the nation would remain secure from communism, and the only way the home would remain secure was if women fulfilled their role as mother and wife. Women featured in this paper who volunteered to serve in Vietnam were not entirely opposed to the domestic role, they simply wanted to delay it and experience the world, an opportunity their mothers did not have. Women who went to Vietnam were proud to take on the domestic role for the American soldier, to bring him a sense of home in order to help ease the burden and stress that they experienced in the field. While this would be one of the hardest times of their lives, it was also one of the most rewarding. While the roles they would play were usually domestic in nature, the skills and life lessons learned in Vietnam enabled these women to become strong and independent.

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NOT THEIR MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

“My time in Vietnam was definitely a mind-expanding experience. I’m grateful to have had and did things in Vietnam in terms of my work that I never would have done in the States ...for years,” Ann Kelsey remarked of her service in Vietnam with the Department of Army Special Services. “You don’t normally walk out of library school and be in charge of four libraries.... I never had an experience in a library in the States ... that I felt was something that I couldn’t handle.”¹ Ann’s decision and the decision of other mainly middle class, white women who chose to serve in Vietnam went against the normative gender roles of the time. They grew up in the fifties and often watched their mother trying to live the American dream—the white, middle class American dream with white picket fence, appliances, station wagons, a doting husband, and beautiful, well-behaved children. They were homemakers not necessarily opposed to working outside of the home, but the era of the fifties dictated that a woman’s place was in the home. The women interviewed for this paper were not aware of the women’s movement beginning to take shape in the United States at the time of their service in Vietnam. Their actions, however, fell in line with what female activists promoted that of gaining an education, delaying marriage, starting a family, and overall being independent strong women. These women did not

¹ Ann Kelsey, interview by Steve Maxner March 27, 2001, “The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project,” *The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University*, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu>.

reject domesticity so much as chose to delay it. Some answered President Kennedy's call to young Americans to go out into the world as missionaries of democracy. Some women thought the chance to travel and experience the world before they settled down into the role of wife and mother sounded exciting. Others felt guilty that conscription forced men to serve, and they wanted to do their part to help. Civilian women volunteering for Vietnam chose not to conform to the gender norms established by their society. Throughout this paper, I will present the history of American civilian women who volunteered for Vietnam and their decisions to distance themselves from the roles that their mothers and grandmothers played. They searched for something that would define them as more than a housewife, which fell outside the domestic role of women at that time. Once they arrived in country, however, women found that it was difficult to get away from the stereotypical roles that were so prevalent at that time ascribed to women. While not motivated by feminism, their decisions and motivations for going to Vietnam promoted many of the same feminist ideas. Between 1963 through 1972 when many of these women served with the peak year being 1968, feminism was still new, and the movement did not take effect until the early 1970s.

The different roles assigned to women of wife, mother, girlfriend, and sister created conflict among the soldiers. While the mother and sister role should not be sexual, that of wife and girlfriend was. The organizations that sent women to Vietnam wanted them to portray all these roles but in a wholesome and chaste manner. This created problems for soldiers who wanted more from

the women who portrayed the role of wife and girlfriend.

World War II played an important role in determining expectations for women during the Vietnam War years. Historian William H. Chafe writes, “No class of people experienced more change as a consequence of [World War II] than American women.”² Immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States officially entered the war. Within weeks, wartime mobilization set in motion developments that would help transform American society. The government declared that the only answer to the labor crisis was to “employ women on a scale hitherto unknown,” reversing a decade of official discrimination against women workers. Women responded enthusiastically to the call for help. Over six million women took jobs, increasing the size of the female labor force by 57 percent.³ Prior to the war, many working-class women worked at low paying jobs; however, once the United States entered into the war, more lucrative and stimulating jobs became available to women. Married, middle-class women also entered the work force, enabling them to learn new skill sets as well as contribute to the war effort.

The image of the American housewife dominated popular culture throughout the 1950s. Chafe notes however, “The most striking features of the fifties was the degree to which women continued to enter the job market and expand their sphere.” Between 1940 and 1960, the numbers of working women doubled, rising from 15 percent to 30 percent, and the proportion of working mothers jumped 400 percent. By 1955, more women worked in the labor force

² William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 10-11

³ Ibid.

than had during World War II.⁴ This was far from what the government had intended for female war workers. Prior to the war's end, public planners tried to wean American women from their wartime jobs. They went as far as writing a job manual for female war workers reminding them that a mother stands at the heart of family. A survey conducted immediately after the war by the Bureau of Women Workers discovered that 75 percent of women workers preferred to remain employed outside of the home.⁵ Once the war ended, however, the returning soldiers forced middle-class women back into the home while working-class women returned to their low paying jobs that they had held prior to the war. Society redefined the jobs that these women had held during the war as "men's work," and so they once again took up their work as a waitress, dishwasher, salesgirl, barmaid, or domestic.

During World War II, changes in the workforce proved temporary and the reality was that most women returned to being homemakers during the prosperity of the 1950s. The road taken by women in the work force during World War II continued into the future; society had changed and the daughters and granddaughters of those women who had entered the work force (even those for a brief time) continued on the same road that their mothers and grandmothers had before them. Women who went to Vietnam followed in the tradition of both work and wartime service.

⁴ William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford, 1972), 18.

⁵ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 20.

In her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Elaine Tyler May argues that in the post-World War II era, Americans turned to family for a sense of security against communism. Valuing security more than anything else, Americans looked to the home as a private place removed from the dangers of the outside world and to the family as a “psychological fortress within which the other potential hazards of the age, sexuality, consumerism, class, technology, women’s liberation and simple discontent, would be contained.”⁶ According to May, Americans used gender and sexuality to make sense of the Cold War world, linking private matters such as marriage and family life to U.S. foreign relations. The belief was that if the home were secure, the nation would remain secure from communism, and the only way the home would remain secure was if women fulfilled their role as mother and wife. Not all women of that era were content to stay at home and be contained. Women were looking for something more that would fulfill their lives rather than simply staying home and being the content homemaker restricted by a society that said their place was in fact in the home.

The Cold War saw the United States and Soviet Union engaged in an ideological struggle for power and influence in the world. The United States leaders portrayed capitalist democracy as the humane alternative to communism. The “kitchen debates” between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and then Vice President Richard Nixon saw each arguing that their way of life was superior over the other. Nixon praised the virtues of the American way of life, while

⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), Kindle Edition

Khrushchev promoted the communist system. For Nixon, American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members. He asserted that the “model” home, with the male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker, decked out with a wide assortment of consumer goods, represented the core of American freedom. The white, middle-class, suburban, nuclear family became the symbol of appropriate roles for men and women. Politicians, sociologists, and medical doctor’s policies placed women in charge of the home and childrearing and gave men financial and political responsibilities.

Along with the struggle for global influence between the two countries, psychological warfare played a role as well, especially where the space race was concerned. The space race between the two countries forced the U.S. Office of Education to publish a study that showed that the Soviet Union outperformed the U.S. in every aspect of scientific and technological education. By 1957, one thing was clear as Susan Douglas in her book *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* writes, “no one said, just the boys—just you boys study hard. This one was on everyone’s heads, girls too, and we were not let off the hook, especially in grammar—school we had to get A’s as well, to fend off the red peril and save our country and ourselves.”⁷ According to Douglas, girls were going to stay feminine, but they were also going to roll up their sleeves and make America number one again.

⁷ Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994), 22

In 1961, a young and handsome John F. Kennedy became President of the United States. In his inaugural address, he stated, “Let the word go forth ... that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.” Douglas emphasized that Kennedy did not say “a new generation of men,” even if that was what he was implying, and never for one minute did she think President Kennedy spoke only to boys; he was talking to her as well. For Susan Douglas, the spirit of the sixties called for and advised girls to try to change the world as well.⁸

Seeking higher education and choosing careers that pushed traditional gender roles, women who volunteered for Vietnam longed for something different than the lives their mother’s had led.⁹ Women who volunteered to serve in Vietnam often identified what Ruth Rosen suggests as, “a private nightmare, sensing the bitterness and disappointment of so many adult women, these daughters came of age eagerly mapping escapes from what they regarded as the claustrophobic constraints of the fifties.”¹⁰ In 1963, housewife Betty Friedan published a book titled *The Feminine Mystique*, which was a series of interviews she conducted with other women who like herself had been educated at Smith College. These women shared with Friedan in the privacy of their homes the “depths of their despairs.”¹¹ Blessed with husbands that were good providers, nice homes, and healthy children, the women were confused as to their extreme unhappiness. Unaware that other women shared their same discontent, they

⁸ Ibid, 23

⁹ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold, Marriage, the Baby Boom and Social Change* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000) 7-10.

¹⁰ Rosen, 3.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

blamed themselves for their own unhappiness. Freidan called this incipient unhappiness “the problem that has no name.” These women sought to crush their inner conflict with alcohol or tranquilizers. They wanted stimulation in their lives and some sought out extramarital affairs or volunteered their time at schools, churches, or charitable organizations. Others filled their homes with the latest appliances in order to find satisfaction. However, with all of these material comforts, women at this time still felt that there was something missing. Freidan discovered that many of these educated women had cultivated dreams that had never come to fruition, but also had never forgotten. Rosen writes, “the postwar conviction that women should limit their lives exclusively to home and hearth had tied them to the family, closed other opportunities, and crushed many spirits.”¹²

By the mid-1960s, white middle-class youth fled the suburbs for the cities, often the inner cities that their parents had fled during the postwar migration to the suburbs. Alice Echols argues, “They were fearful of becoming Jim Bakus or June Cleaver, many young people avoided settling down at all costs. White, middle-class kids’ restlessness and their search for meaning and stimulation was a reaction to their parents’ preoccupation with comfort and security—itself a response to the uncertainties and insecurities of the Depression and war years.”¹³ She goes on to say that the dullness of suburban life as well as the lack of stimulation perhaps helped to provoke the risk-taking of baby-boomers eager to experiment with drugs, sex, new music such as rock-n-roll, anything other than

¹² Ibid

¹³ Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground: The '60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 59.

“Cold-Warrior-style politics.”¹⁴ Echols quotes Winifred Breines from her book *Young, White, and Miserable* when she talks about the “contradiction between the feminine mystique and the emancipatory possibilities of the fifties (higher education, more democratic marriages, paid work, and better sex) created ‘dry tinder’ for the spark of women’s liberation.”¹⁵

Feminist Paula Weideger explains that many young feminists feared marriage and motherhood because they were afraid they would turn out like their own mothers who were housewives and housewives only. According to Weideger, women who grew up in the 1950s became “edgy and claustrophobic by the narrowness of the life laid out for them from birth. To give mother feeling any place in your heart might mean being lost to mothering forever—or at least ‘till the kids are grown.”¹⁶

Women featured in this paper were not directly opposed to marriage and motherhood; however, the opportunities made available to them as they came of age in the 1960s enabled them to experience life in a way their mother never had. Feminist author Barbara Berg observed that this was not the first time in American history that daughters had desired to live lives different from their mothers. The generation coming of age in the sixties and seventies had a unique opportunity to act on their dreams and motivations and to make their ambitions a reality.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Barbara Berg, *The Crisis of the Working Mother* (New York: Summit, 1986), 40

The 1960s saw increased numbers of women taking the opportunity to achieve higher education. By the late fifties, in fact, liberal middle-class families expected that their daughters would attend college. There was confusion that came with this expectation as experts warned that every year a girl spent developing her mind “reduced the probability of a woman marrying.”¹⁸ An article in the *Ladies Home Journal* in May 1960 titled “It’s All the Fault of Women,” articulated a woman’s place was in the home and their education should concentrate on homemaking and fitting them for their special roles as wives and mothers. According to the article, “it was more important that women put a good dinner on the table than strive for higher education.”¹⁹ As the number of women pursuing higher education increased in the 1960s, the stereotype remained that a woman’s place was in the home, which was the role that society still expected them to fill. For the women who chose to go to Vietnam, a college education was a prerequisite. The expectation to attend college aided the women who chose to go to Vietnam, for without an education, Vietnam would not have been a possibility.

Many of the women featured in this paper chose to pursue higher education. Upon completing their degree, society called on them to find a husband, settle down, and start a family. Ann Kelsey reflected, “I know I felt that the most important thing I could do was get married and have a family. It was a given, and I do not know any of my female friends who felt differently at that

¹⁸ Rosen, 40.

¹⁹ Dorothy Thompson, “It’s All the Fault of Women,” *Ladies Home Journal*, May 1960, 11.

time.”²⁰ Helen Tennant-Hegelheimer who served with US Airways as a stewardess remembers, “There was just an incredible amount of social pressure to get married. You were supposed to get married and once you were married, it did not stop. Then when is the baby—when are the babies coming? It didn’t seem like there was any other option.”²¹ Sandra Davis’ (who served in the Army Special Services) mother encouraged her to marry “because marrying and family represented security, and security was my mother’s main priority.”²²

For those women who did not get married immediately following high school and chose to obtain college degrees, society almost demanded them to pursue gender appropriate professions such as teachers, librarians, registered nurses, cosmetologists, childcare workers, and secretaries. Rene Johnson served with the American Red Cross in Vietnam and as a teenager growing up in the 1960s knew there were things she wanted to do but could not because she was female. Rene wanted to take Judo classes, but they would not let girls in. Later Rene wanted to learn to shoot rifles and become a marksman, but it was not until her father became an instructor that she was allowed to be on a team. In college, Rene wanted to be on the Pershing Rifles team, but you had to be in the ROTC to be allowed on the team, and the ROTC did not accept women at that time. When she attended college, Rene did not want to major in what society dictated was a typical woman’s profession. She tried to major in criminology, but the department head at that time would not sign off on it. Rene

²⁰ Ann Kelsey, email message to author, March 28, 2013.

²¹ Helen Tennant-Hegelheimer interview by Dr. Laura Caulkins, June 24, 2004, Texas Tech University Oral History Project, *The Vietnam Center and Archive*, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/>.

²² Dr. Sandra Lockney Davis email message to author, April 17, 2013.

remembers, “He said, with that degree the most I could hope for would be a secretary in a police department.”²³

Vietnam was one of America’s longest wars. More than half a million American service members fought, and more than 300,000 were wounded, many with multiple amputations. “It was a savage war,” Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt writes in her book *A Time Remembered, American Women in the Vietnam War*.²⁴ We can only guess as to the numbers of women who served in the military in Vietnam. While the Defense Department did not keep accurate records on women, it has calculated that approximately 7,500 women served in Vietnam; the Veterans Administration has set the number at 11,000. More than 80 percent served as nurses, most in the Army Nurse Corps. Among those who were not nurses, about 700 women were members of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), and much smaller numbers served in the Navy, Air Force, and Marines.²⁵ Pinning down the numbers of civilian women who worked in Vietnam is difficult; estimates have gone as high as 55,000. Kathryn Marshall in her book *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of Women in Vietnam* notes that the lack of official records “both serves as a reminder of government mishandling of information during the Vietnam War and points to a more general belief that war is men’s business.”²⁶ Women played a vital role, whether aiding the wounded, mourning the dead, or desperately trying to raise the morale of the fighting men and keep it high. All the

²³ Rene Johnson, email to author 27 March 2013.

²⁴ Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered, American Women in the Vietnam War* (California: Presidio Press, 1999), xi.

²⁵ Ron Steinman, *Women in Vietnam* (New York: TV Books, 2000), 18-20.

²⁶ Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1987), 4.

women who served in Vietnam and Southeast Asia volunteered, and they did so for almost as many reasons as there were women—to support the armed forces, for adventure, to see the world, to escape boredom, or to do what they could to help.²⁷

Women who chose to go to Vietnam received varying support from family and friends on their decision to go. While women in war zones were not new, Vietnam with its “no front” worried many parents whose daughters had chosen to go. Jennifer Young’s family was supportive of her decision to go to Vietnam. Her family felt that she was a grown woman and if she wanted to go to Vietnam in support of the troops, it was ultimately her call. Maureen Nerli’s mother was terrified of her decision to go, while her mother was not happy that she was going, she was proud of her decision. For Ann Kelsey, her parents had recently succeeded in getting her brother into the National Guard in order to avoid the draft; they were “dismayed that she had chosen to go to Vietnam.”²⁸ Diana Dell’s brother Kenny was killed in the Mekong Delta in 1968. This terrified her family that the same fate might await her once she arrived to work with the USO.

For the women who chose to serve in Vietnam, the danger of a war zone did not deter their willingness to serve. For many, they felt that the American soldier needed them, and they were going to go regardless of their family’s opposition. In a sense, women who went to Vietnam for the American soldier seemed contradictory in their decision to put off domesticity and marriage at home.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ann Kelsey, interview by Steve Maxner.

The majority of American women who served in Vietnam in either military or civilian capacities arrived between 1965, the year of the first deployment of ground troops, and in 1973, when the last U.S. combat troops departed. Exempt from the draft, not all women who joined the armed services during the era wanted an assignment in Vietnam. When it came down to it, some went because they had received orders to do so. In comparison, civilian women mostly chose to go to Vietnam, often fueled by their desire to help the troops.

Civilian women often worked directly with the military. The American Red Cross had a field service staff that helped with arrangements for emergency leaves and generally acted as a liaison between soldiers and families. They also had in-hospital staff. Originally established in 1882 by Clara Barton, the American Red Cross has since served and provided aid to civilian and military personnel in times of crisis or war. Sent to Vietnam by Congress in 1962, the ARC's role was to assist the increasing number of American military in the country.²⁹ General Westmoreland, the military commander at the time, requested the service of the ARC workers. He considered them of great importance to the morale of the men. In addition, the American Red Cross sponsored the Supplemental Recreational Overseas (SRAO) program, which hired college educated women in their twenties to "boost the morale of the troops."³⁰ For women who volunteered in Vietnam they were there with the Red Cross Supplemental Recreational Overseas Program (ARC, SRAO). Their role

²⁹ *American Red Cross*, "Background on Eleven Year Red Cross Mission to U.S. Troops in Vietnam," Press Release, Washington D.C. (May 1973): 1.

³⁰ Marshall, 8.

was to represent all that was wholesome and good about girls, women, moms, sisters, and wives waiting for servicemen back home.³¹

During World War II, known as “donut dollies,” ARC women ran clubs and canteens in rear areas and drove to the front lines in vans equipped for making coffee and doughnuts. The Red Cross initiated SRAO in 1953 when it sent teams of women to South Korea to work with U.S. troops fighting in the Korean War. Defense Department authorities noted that U.S. troops could be in Vietnam for a “long duration” and at times have considerable downtime and worried that boredom combined with isolation could make it “difficult to maintain the morale of trained combat ready troops.”³² From 1967 to 1968, the program’s peak year in Vietnam, an average of 280,500 servicemen participated in SRAO activities every month at twenty major bases. “Clubmobile” units crossed an average of more than 27,000 miles each month to “fire support bases,”—camps for infantry operating far from a permanent post. The Red Cross estimated that clubmobile teams traveled more than two million miles during the seven years the SRAO program operated in the Vietnam War.³³

Although the name “donut dolly” stuck, in Vietnam SRAO women were known as “chopper chicks” and “Kool-Aid kids.” Like the World War II donut dollies, these women ran base camp centers where soldiers could play cards, shoot pool, and hang out. Furthermore, they were paid—to as one former SRAO woman put it—“dream up crazy things to do.” They put on style shows for the

³¹ Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 65.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 67.

troops, organized art shows and sing-alongs. Unlike the original donut dollies, the new donut dollies rode in on choppers to heavy combat areas on an almost daily basis. There they served Kool-Aid, talked with the troops, and led audience participation games.³⁴ Combat areas taken only a day or two before saw women come in to talk with the men, many who had lost friends; they would listen to them and try to let them know that they cared. In addition to the Donut Dollies, there were also women in the ARC who worked in Service to Military Hospitals and Service to Military Installations. In the peak year, 1968, 480 ARC staff assisted an average of 25,500 men each month in the clubs and 2,300 cases each month in the hospitals.³⁵ From 1965 through 1972, the program sent approximately 700 women to sites throughout Vietnam to boost the morale of the troops.³⁶

The program was open only to female college graduates between the ages of 21 and 24, so the women tended to be a few years older than the average U.S. GI in Vietnam, and parents had to give written permission for their daughters to go to Vietnam. The draft, which could send any man 18 or older to Vietnam without approval, was in plain contrast to this protocol by the Red Cross. This stark disparity illustrates the chasm between the sexes where young men, barely completing high school, could enter the war/draft on their own accord while women, many of whom were senior to their male counterparts, had to seek

³⁴ Marshall, 8.

³⁵ Sharon Dickerson, "American Red Cross Women in Vietnam," *Celebration of Patriotism and Courage*, November 1993, 67.

³⁶ "Department of Defense Request for SRAO in Vietnam," June 4, 1965, National Archives, Record Group 200 – Records of the American National Red Cross, 1965-1979.

approval from their family. Society viewed women as more dependent and unable to make their own decisions.

SRAO volunteers symbolized the American way of life that soldiers were fighting to protect. Heather Stur in her book, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam Era*, argues that during the Cold War, the ideal woman was white, suburban, and domestic in nature. This girl next door was a wholesome reminder of what the American soldier was fighting for in Vietnam. Stur writes that the SRAO intentionally constructed an image of American women as wholesome, girlish, and chaste. Nancy Warner, in an interview with Heather Stur, stated that SRAO volunteers represented “all that was wholesome and good about girls, moms, sisters and wives,” waiting for service members back home. Donut Dollies symbolized the American way of life that soldiers fought to protect. The careful structure and guideline of their image by the Red Cross and the Defense Department illustrates in powerful ways the “thoroughly gendered nature of Cold War conceptions of National Security and the American way of life.”³⁷

The different roles that women volunteers assumed in Vietnam of wife, mother, girlfriend, and sister were not always indicative of the image constructed by the SRAO. The expectation of the SRAO was that the women were there only in a nonphysical sense, to remind the soldier of why they were fighting communism in Vietnam, to protect the American way of life. The SRAO forbade its volunteers to fraternize with soldiers outside of their daily duties. Directors of the SRAO program either overlooked or did not take into account that soldiers

³⁷ Stur, 65

would see the women as something other than wholesome or chaste. For some soldiers, a woman's presence in a war zone could only mean one thing, and it fell outside the role of mother and sister. For many, women volunteers represented sexuality to the soldiers, which fell in line with the role of girlfriend and wife.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also sent women (and men) to Vietnam. The goal of USAID was to manage economic and humanitarian assistance programs in foreign countries. In Vietnam, specifically, USAID sent staff as advisors in agriculture, labor relations, communications, health, police, and as tax consultants. The United States government wanted to win the hearts and minds of the people of Vietnam, and USAID specifically went to Vietnam with this goal in mind.^{38, 39}

The United Service Organization (USO) also served in Vietnam from 1963 through 1974. President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the USO in 1941 to meet the morale needs of the servicemen and women during World War II. To staff the clubs, run the canteens, sew the buttons on uniforms, and be mother/girlfriend, women from all lifestyles signed up to be Victory Belles. Vietnam had its share of Victory Belles, also known as Associate Directors and Directors. The role was the same: bring a touch of home to our soldiers wherever they go, wherever they are. As the USO logo says, "A Home Away From Home."⁴⁰

³⁸ Shelley Saywell, *Women in War: From World War II to El Salvador* (Ontario: Penguin Books, 1985), 230.

³⁹ Sharon Rice Grant, "Does Anybody Care About the Health Effects of Women Who Served in Vietnam?" (Master's Thesis, California State University, Sacramento, 1986), 16.

⁴⁰ Maureen Nerli, "The Unsung Heroes of Vietnam, Those USO Club Women," *Celebration of Patriotism and Courage*, 10-12, 1993, 69.

General Westmoreland in 1963 told the Department of Defense that there was a need for USO clubs in Vietnam. April of that year saw the opening of the first club, and over the next eleven years there would be as many as twenty-two clubs throughout the country from as far south as Can Tho (approximately one hundred miles south of Saigon) and as far north as Da Nang. The USO recruited young women with degrees in theatre, broadcasting, and recreation directly from college campuses. USO sent women to Vietnam for tours of eighteen months, longer than any other organization in Vietnam. While no official uniform was required, they did, however, require perfume. The USO did not allow slacks, and so many USO women wore the minidress. Upon arrival in Vietnam, Sam Anderson, the Executive Director of the USO in Vietnam, told everyone the same thing: "Your job in Vietnam is to be happy. Never let the men see you cry."⁴¹

In the USO clubs, soldiers could relax by watching television or playing pool. They could make overseas telephone calls, record messages to send home, and visit gift shops or barbershops. However, the greatest attraction was the chance to enjoy American-style-food—hamburgers and milkshakes. Maureen Nerli, who worked at the Tan Son Nhut USO Club, said they served "between five hundred and eight hundred shakes, hot dogs, and hamburgers every day."⁴² The ideal for the USO clubs was to offer the soldiers a safe and sane diversion from the war. Nerli described her job as being just like "a mom."

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴²"Maureen Nerli," Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart* (New York: Ballantine Publishing, 1985), 126.

Of all the women who worked for the USO, about 98 percent worked in the service clubs.⁴³

USO shows were also a popular attraction for the soldiers. In 1964, Bob Hope presented the first of his eight annual Christmas shows in Vietnam. Famous female celebrities who took part in the shows included Connie Stevens, Raquel Welch, Phyllis Diller, Ann Margaret, and Nancy Sinatra, not to mention the countless others who made the shows possible. In May 1965 to June 1972, 569 USO Show units put on over 5,600 performances in Vietnam.⁴⁴

The USO also had mobile units that, much like the Donut Dollies, visited remote firebases where they talked to the soldiers, served food, sang, or performed shows. Mo Nerli said, “We were continually being asked to visit the men in the fields and usually did so several times a week despite our heavy workload at the club.”⁴⁵

The last agency to send women to Vietnam was the Army Special Services. Their service in Vietnam started on 1 July 1966. Again, it is difficult to estimate how many women worked for the Special Services: “Half the time I don’t think they knew how many people were there,” said Cathleen Cordova, a former Special Services worker.⁴⁶ Over the next six years, somewhere between three hundred to sixteen hundred civilians worked for the Army Special Services, women made up three quarters of that number. Considered civil service

⁴³ Maureen Nerli, interview by Maryann Weber, August 3, 1995.

⁴⁴ Frank Coffey, *Fifty Years with the USO* (New York: Brassey’s Inc., 1991), 92.

⁴⁵ Mo Nerli, interview by Maryann Weber, August 3, 1995

⁴⁶ Maryann L. Weber, “Forgotten Sacrifices: American Civilian Women in the Vietnam War” (master’s thesis, San Jose State University, 1996), 51.

employees, the Special Services worked directly for the U.S. military called the Department of Army Civilians.⁴⁷

The Army Special Services operated craft shops, libraries, and service clubs as well as coordinated entertainment programs. They also offered classes in metal enameling, model building, lapidary, photography, painting, and leatherwork. Their first program in Vietnam was the library. Special Services supervised 250 field library units, arranged the field distribution of 190,000 magazine subscriptions and 350,000 paperbacks. Librarians helped those soldiers interested in taking correspondence classes through the University of Maryland. Special Services organized entertainment shows such as theater productions and Ping-Pong tournaments as well as coordinated USO tours.⁴⁸

Organizations who sent women to Vietnam wanted them to be the reminder of hearth and home. The stereotypical role of women from the 1950s had travelled halfway across the world to Vietnam. Just as it had back in the states, representing these images required a specific look. The Red Cross instructed Donut Dollies that, when packing civilian clothes for Vietnam, “practicality should not be carried to the extent that femininity is lost.”⁴⁹ Ann Kelsey, when describing her flight to Vietnam sarcastically indicated, “I was dressed in this blue uniform with a straight skirt and the gloves and hose and pumps and hat, very practical for a twenty-four hour flight.”⁵⁰ By symbolizing a

⁴⁷ Ann Kelsey, “Civilian Women in Vietnam: Army Special Services,” *Celebration of Patriotism and Courage*, November 1993, 71.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Stur, 78

⁵⁰ Ann Kelsey, interview by Steve Maxner

place far from the war zone and helping create a home front image at the battlefield, Donut Dollies lifted service men's spirits.

Patty Woodridge, SRAO director in Vietnam from 1965 to 1966 described the girl next door as "the symbol of ideal American womanhood—wholesome, a 'pal' rather than a paramour, a mother or a sister rather than a pin-up girl."⁵¹ She considered the girl-next-door image to be part of the "psychological warfare" of Vietnam.⁵² American troops fighting on foreign soil, without a clear reason for being in Vietnam or a definite distinction between ally and enemy, "could look at the donut dollies for reminders of what they had to look forward to back home, and what they were fighting for."⁵³ The image of the girl next door was conflicting to soldiers in Vietnam. While organizations like the SRAO and USO wanted the soldiers to see women volunteers as chaste and wholesome, the promotion of the girl next door for many soldiers saw her as someone they could date and in a sense ultimately get to know on a much more personal level.

May writes, "the image of the girl next door embodied ideas about middle-class domesticity and contained sexuality, two hallmarks of American Cold War culture regarded as essential if the United States were to triumph over Soviet communism."⁵⁴ To implement SRAO's innocent image, as well as those serving with other organizations, sexual activity was specifically discouraged within the organization. Red Cross officials believed that sexual expression by SRAO volunteers specifically was very destructive to the mission of the program in

⁵¹ Stur, 79

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ May, 85

Vietnam. If the girl next door gave up her purity, sinking to the level of a communist whore, then what was America fighting for? The SRAO wanted their donut dollies to represent a chaste femininity wanted them to be emissaries of a united, patriotic, democratic America.⁵⁵

The training these women received prior to Vietnam was lacking at best. SRAO workers learned how to plan games and other activities for the soldiers but as far as how to behave in a war zone, there was not any training. Ann Kelsey remembers, “I had no specific training or orientation from the Army for working in a military environment or for working/living in a war zone. I was issued travel orders, uniforms, and given directions on what inoculations to get prior to leaving by mail.”⁵⁶ While the Red Cross and the USO both offered at least a two-week training course, the training once again was not relevant to living in a war zone.

In Vietnam, a front line did not exist. Women, nurses included, were supposed to be safe in the rear. The Army considered women “non-combatants” and did not issue steel helmets or flak jackets. Instead, they had to scrounge for them so they would have some protection during rocket and mortar attacks. When asked about safety procedures and equipment, Mo Nerli exclaimed, “Helmets are you kidding? Helmets are you kidding! Never, boots, never guns, never vests, never helmets, never. Nothing!”⁵⁷ In most cases, these women received training on how to behave like a lady rather than what to do when being mortared or how to respond in a war zone. Women learned what to do by

⁵⁵ Stur, 69.

⁵⁶ Ann Kelsey, email message to author, March 30, 2012

⁵⁷ Mo Nerli, interview by Maryann Weber, August 3, 1995.

watching others who had been in country longer. Lack of concern on the part of these organizations was indeed startling. The military women had better training and appropriate gear once they arrived in country depending on their job and where their assignment. Ann Kelsey said, “the civilians though, just had to wing it.”⁵⁸

Ann Kelsey believes that “the military refused to recognize the meaning of a no-front, often guerilla war situation, where a noncombatant designation is meaningless. As a result, the official assumption was that if women were a noncombatant, all civilian and military women, were given that designation, there was no need to train or equip women adequately for life in a war zone because women would never find themselves under attack. This was one hundred percent true for civilians.”⁵⁹ Women often found themselves under attack in Vietnam. They often went to firebases and forward areas where the men were fighting. SRAO women in particular found themselves working in areas that were off limits to military women.

Women who volunteered to go to Vietnam found the domestic role as caregiver to the soldiers both satisfying as well as emotionally and physically draining. Jeanne Christie recalled pouring orange soda into a cup and handing them to exhausted soldiers. They had just returned from the field and still had dirt caked on their hands, a wash of tears, sweat, and grime streaking their faces. The games that the donut dollies had planned for the day seemed inappropriate now, so she ladled more orange soda that had grown warm due to the Vietnam

⁵⁸ Ann Kelsey, email message to author, March 28, 2010.

⁵⁹ Ann Kelsey, email message to author, March 28, 2010.

heat and headed over to a group of soldiers. The soldiers invited the Red Cross workers to join them. Some wanted to talk about friends that had been injured or killed; others needed to cry. Some were unable to speak, still shocked by what they had seen and done. Jeanne Christie offered her ear and shoulder and tried to figure out how to give the guys some comfort. Her job required emotional strength and quick thinking, and it was tough. Moments such as these revealed how messy and emotionally draining the work of domesticity could be.⁶⁰

Jeanne's recollection shows how hard "women's work" could be.

While they were not out fighting on the front lines, the emotional heartache they experienced from comforting the soldiers was not only emotionally draining but physically as well. Many women came home from the war with some form of posttraumatic stress from the "domestic work" they provided in Vietnam. They too grew close with the soldiers, many forming friendships with these soldiers, some of whom died. They held dying soldier's hands, reassuring them that they would be okay even knowing that what they said was not true. They listened for hours to soldiers as they poured out their hearts to these women about their fallen comrades. This role was extremely difficult and caused lifelong problems for many of the women once they returned home.

Cathleen Cordova, who worked with the Army Special Services in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969 as the Director of an Army Service Club, described her work in Vietnam as "stress management." She said, "The whole idea was to provide

⁶⁰ Stur, 75-76

some kind of distraction and get them away from the war.”⁶¹ The volunteers tried to “calm them down and give them a break” by providing a clean, safe, and quiet place for them to relax. “We spent many hours in the lounge just listening to the men ventilate,” said Georgeanne Duffy Andreason, who served with the Special Services from 1967 to 1968.⁶²

Helen Tennant-Hegelheimer, a stewardess with World Airways from 1966-1967 remarked, “Becoming a stewardess wasn’t necessarily considered a nice girl’s job by some.” Being a flight attendant was a highly sexualized occupation at this time and Helen says, her decision to become one “certainly bucked what was expected of me.”⁶³ Outside the stereotype of a flight attendant as a sex symbol, their job was in essence a domestic one. Their role was to make sure travelers were comfortable, serve them refreshments, and be on hand to cater to the needs of those travelling on their flights. Helen’s position as a flight attendant put her in a role where she became the surrogate mother, wife, sister, or girlfriend to the soldiers she was transporting to and from Vietnam. Many soldiers going to Vietnam asked Helen if she would write to them. She never turned any of them down and would give them one of her business cards and said she “wrote to more GIs, then I can even tell you what their names are and by the time I’d get a letter, I didn’t know which GI it was, from which they would say, ‘You met me on the plane.’”⁶⁴ Helen to this day still feels a sense of guilt

⁶¹ Cathleen Cordova, “Rumors of War,” Internet, available through *Vietnam Veterans Homepage*, <http://www.vietvet.org/rumwar.htm>

⁶² Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of Twenty-Six American Women who served in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1985), 30

⁶³ Helen Tennant-Hegelheimer, email to author, April 1, 2013.

⁶⁴ Helen Tennant-Hegelheimer, interview by Dr. Laura Calkins, June 15, 2004.

about not remembering faces with names but did her best to aid the troops in whatever way she could. Helen remembers, “I never said good-bye or good luck. I would shake their hand, look them in the eye, smile, and say, ‘See you later,’ sometimes I’d say, ‘See you in twelve months.’ They really wanted someone to look at them. At the top of the ramp was the world; at the bottom of the ramp was the war. I saw eyes full of fear, some with real terror. Maybe this sounds crazy, but I saw death in some of those eyes. At that moment, at the top of the ramp, I was their wife, their sister, their girlfriend and for those troops who had no one else—and there were many—I was their mother. That was the most important thing I’ve ever done.”⁶⁵ Helen and her roommate would often visit the local drugstore, buy up the entire stock of Playboy magazines, and mail them to the soldiers in Vietnam. For Helen and her roommate, sending Playboy magazines was their way of showing support for the troops in Vietnam. This was their way of sending them a piece of home. Helen remembers that most of the other women with whom she worked with did not like standing at the front door when the men deplaned in Vietnam. Helen volunteered for this and soon made the bargain that “I’ll take the front door in Vietnam if I can have the bottom of the ramp at Travis. So I got to be the one that welcomed them home and I stood at the bottom of the ramp.” Helen did say “Welcome Home” when they arrived back in the states at Travis Air Force Base. “An ungrateful nation left the

⁶⁵ Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 108

'homecoming' to a 22 year old stewardess standing at the bottom of the ramp with the [sign] 'Welcome Home Troop[s].'"⁶⁶

While they stepped outside of traditional gender roles of the time by postponing marriage and family, once they reached Vietnam a majority assumed a "domestic role" because that was their job. Women accepted this part of their job because the soldiers needed it, it was important to them, so it needed to be done. A large portion of their job required of the women was that of emotional labor. Listening to soldiers feelings about their experiences and comforting them traditionally falls under the female domestic role. Just as they had at home, women in Vietnam fulfilled these roles in Vietnam.

Jeanne Christie remembered while serving outside of Da Nang she went to an LZ (landing zone) where there had just been intense fighting only the night before. The troops were dealing with a lot; because of this they did not do any sort of program, they just "talked, and talked and talked. There were some guys who would sit back and not talk to us; they just couldn't. Others would come over, and they'd talk about their wives or their girlfriends. It was very depressing and sad, yet so very touching, because it didn't matter who we were but just the simple fact that we were there and were 'home'—America and femininity—to them."⁶⁷

Sandra Davis recalls visiting an ambushed battalion, many of whom she and other women had become close with. As Sandra walked from bed to bed visiting with the wounded, she recalled, "I went into automatic pilot. So many of

⁶⁶ Helen Tennant-Hegelheimer, email to author, March 27, 2012.

⁶⁷ Walker, *A Piece of My Heart*, 67.

them had such severe wounds I wanted to cry. I knew that they would be sensitive to my reaction and think whatever they saw in my face would be the reaction they would see on the faces of their mothers, their sweethearts or their wives.” With all the strength she could gather, she smiled, made small talk and tried to act as if nothing had happened to them.⁶⁸ According to Sandra, their visit to the hospital left them emotionally drained and was one of the most difficult experiences of her life. Women who volunteered for Vietnam experienced similar emotions when visiting wounded soldiers, many whom they had befriended. They kept their emotions bottled up and put on a happy face for the troops. Jennifer Young remembered when some of the men received Dear John letters and poured out their sorrow to the women, wanting to share the pain of their ended romances. Jennifer knew the Red Cross women filled a role here. “From us, I think they sought sympathy. We could lament and give them our female reaction. Maybe through us they got a small, much needed, female reaffirmation of their self-image. They also could express the sadness of a lost love.”⁶⁹ Another time, the Viet Cong struck one of the women’s favorite firebases. When they rushed to visit them at the field hospital, Jennifer recalled, “We had to put on our smiles and not let them know we were fighting back tears. We had to let them talk about what happened if that’s what they wanted to do, or talk about anything *but* what happened. One guy wanted to talk, but to do so he had to press on a plastic device at the base of his throat. I held my breath and dug my fingernails into my palms as I conversed. The whole day was an emotional

⁶⁸ Dr. Sandra Lockney Davis, *So, What’s a Nice Girl Like You Doing In a Place Like This? Seoul to Saigon*, (Florida: East Bay Publishers, 2011), 187.

⁶⁹ Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, 185.

drain.” Women found the role of listener to be one of the hardest parts of their job. While talking to the women was helpful for the men, it frequently left these women emotionally devastated. Dorothy White Patterson found that she really had to “fight to keep up her morale and not become depressed.”⁷⁰ To their credit, the women put on a brave face and did not let the men see how hard it was for them to listen as they continued to visit them daily.

The roles that these women played, mother, sister, wife, and girlfriend often confused and at times blended into the single role of woman or sexual women. While a mother and sister role symbolized caregiving, comfort and entertainment, the role of a wife and girlfriend often had different connotations. Many soldiers assumed that the role of wife and girlfriend was sexual; as a result they thought these women were there to provide them with sexual services. The assumption was that if women were there to support the soldiers, the only way to support them was through sex. Historically, the presence of women in a warzone has been associated with prostitution. The various agencies that sent women to Vietnam had not thought this through nor did the women who went. Soldiers, therefore, understandably often thought of these roles as sexual. “I was never once treated disrespectfully. We were made to feel special over there. Those men thought the world of us and showed it in a very positive way,” recalled Jeanne Hasenbeck.⁷¹

A common misconception found in Vietnam was that American women who worked for civilian organizations as well as military women were there

⁷⁰ Ibid, 197

⁷¹ Jeanne Hasenbeck, interview by Maryann Weber, November 1, 1995.

merely as prostitutes. “Nurses do it for free, but the Red Cross girls charge,” was a popular saying in Vietnam that Penni Evans often heard and some men actually believed.⁷² According to Ann Kelsey, “Some of the men believed that the only women who would go into a war zone were those that were there to make money by selling themselves.”⁷³ For these women, proving they were not in Vietnam to provide sexual services took a lot of time and energy. The term sexual harassment did not exist prior to 1973. Because of this, sexual harassment, especially in the workplace seemed very normal. For the most part, the soldiers were extremely respectful of the women who worked in Vietnam and greatly admired them for their decision to serve. Organizations did not allow women who exhibited stress, depression, sadness, or anger. These women learned to internalize their fear and anger, or absorb it.

Leisa D. Meyer in her book *Creating G.I. Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II*, looks at the creation of the Women's Auxiliary Corps (WACs) and how there was a lot of anxiety and confusion among servicemen and civilians as to the role that these female soldiers would play. During World War II, the U.S. military relied on women's services in the war effort in many ways. In addressing the new military status of the WAC, many people focused on women's lack of sexual protection within the Army. They expressed concern with the vulnerability of servicewomen within the Army generally and the “sexual advances” of male officers in particular. The Army required strict division between officers and enlisted men, many of whom considered them at the mercy

⁷² Walker, *A Piece of My Heart*, 281.

⁷³ Ann Kelsey, interview by Author, October 10, 2009.

of officers' whims. This was bad enough for the men, but many worried that there would be serious consequences for women. One male corporal warned a WAC friend, "There is no absolute means of forcing them to become playthings for the officers, but the power is there to make things unpleasant if they don't."⁷⁴ Contained in these statements was a concern with the possibly disastrous results of servicewomen's lack of traditional family protection and the likelihood of sexual harassment, leaving them prone to the advances of "ill-intentioned men."⁷⁵

With the foundation of the WAC, many male soldiers began a slander campaign against them. The men felt that women's insertion into the military would defeminize them and that the role envisioned for women was not of a soldier, but of "morale booster" to male GIs.⁷⁶ As Meyer explains, "While morale boosting did not necessarily imply prostitution, or sexual service, the two were often linked in the public consciousness, and explicit in this type of allegation was the belief that boosting male morale involved providing sexual services to GIs and officers."⁷⁷ Many feared that in establishing the WAC, the Army was creating an organized cadre of prostitutes to satisfy male soldiers' needs for heterosexual companionship and keep their morale high. "In other words," Meyer states, "the Army itself might pose the most serious threat to women, exploiting rather than protecting female soldiers."⁷⁸ The WAC therefore required sexual abstinence for its soldiers and tried not to recruit married women. They

⁷⁴ Lisa D. Meyer, *Creating G.I. Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 39.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 41.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

were to represent hearth and home, just as other organizations that sent women to Vietnam required the women who worked for them to be like the virginal girl next door.

The idea remained, however, that the only reason a woman would venture into a war zone would be to provide sexual services to the soldiers. Ann Kelsey notes, "That while sexual harassment is not peculiar in a war zone what made these negative experiences more intense in Vietnam was the fact that they were perpetrated on women who had voluntarily put themselves in harm's way by going to a place that was by definition dangerous and they were clearly a minority."⁷⁹ The image of purity that different agencies who sent women to Vietnam required and embodied conflicted with the realities of sexual behavior in Vietnam; it also contradicted changing realities on the home front, where women and some men had begun to challenge Cold War notions of domesticity.⁸⁰ Civilian women who worked closely with the American troops had to worry about the sexual threat posed by those they had gone to Vietnam to support—the American soldier. In some cases, the women's closest companions, their dearest friends, the men they had traveled half way across the world to help, sometimes became the biggest threat to them.

For women who volunteered to serve in Vietnam, this was an extra layer of burden that they had to deal with simply because they were women and subject to this type of behavior by men. As I stated before, sexual harassment in the workplace did not exist until well into the 1980s. Heather Stur explains that

⁷⁹ Ann Kelsey, "War Zone Diversions," Paper presented at the Massachusetts Historical Society Conference, August 20-21, 2004, 10

⁸⁰ Stur, 90

women stood at a “dangerous intersection of gender, sex, and violence, at which assumptions about appropriate gender roles and sexual behavior disintegrated in a heated war zone that had its own conventions dictating women’s purposes and acceptable sexual expression. Donut dollies went to Vietnam to represent the girl next door, a wholesome symbol of Americana, but in the minds of some troops, the presence of women made sense only in sexual terms.”⁸¹ Marianne Gable Reynolds recalled one day she was given a helicopter hop to Saigon for a meeting, and upon landing the crew chief nonchalantly asked her if she ever got hit up for sex? Marianne answered, “Well, no, I’m treated better here than at home.”⁸² One day against her better judgment, Cherie Rankin accepted a ride from a couple of GIs. When Cherie got into the jeep, the two men put her between them. As the driver started to drive away, the other man started to molest her. Cherie recalled, “His hands were everywhere—up my dress, in my panties. I was biting him and yelling at him.”⁸³ Both of the men were telling her that she “did this all the time, that Red Cross girls give it to the officers for free.”⁸⁴ Cherie finally got their attention and was able to stop them and get away without any real damage done. Cherie stated that, “I don’t think they were dangerous in terms of hurting me physically. They weren’t threatening me with their weapons. They just thought I was a loose woman and that I’d been doing it and it was no big deal.”⁸⁵ Cherie debated with herself whether to report the incident. After talking with her unit director as well as a lawyer on base, Cherie made the

⁸¹ Stur, 95.

⁸² Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, 154

⁸³ Kathryn Marshall, 69

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

decision not to report them. Women in Vietnam who experienced sexual harassment dealt with it as best they could. Some chose to report it while others did not. Many women lived with the stress caused by the sexual harassment, pushed it down deep inside them and continued to do their jobs to the best of their ability.

As the United States began to phase out their troop presence in Vietnam, organizations that brought women to Vietnam began to send them home as well. Women in Vietnam symbolized one of the ways that Americans sought to impose gender stereotypes, and this was all the more distinct under the pressure of sexual tension that marked the war zone in Vietnam. Heather Stur explains in Vietnam, U.S. troops were fighting to defend the American way of life, symbolized by the Cold War domestic ideal. The experiences of women volunteers in Vietnam demonstrated the failure of that ideal.

While the emerging feminist movement did not influence the decision of these women to serve in Vietnam, the women who volunteered showed a sense of individuality by stepping outside of the traditional gender roles that society dictated they fill. Rene Johnson commented that, “the job was the opposite of the feminist movement; it put us back into being seen just as girls.”⁸⁶ While Ann Kelsey had heard of the women’s movement, it did not influence her decision to serve in Vietnam. It was not until the 1990s that she began to think that her going to Vietnam was an example of what the feminist movement was trying to accomplish. Ann remarked, “Here we were, female nurses, recreation workers, librarians, secretaries, in the middle of the first war without a front plying our pink

⁸⁶ Rene Johnson, email to author, March 28, 2013.

collar trades, supporting our men, but having to do it in a way that was distinctly not the June Cleaver method of operation. None of us thought of ourselves as feminists, but in fact we were learning the skills that would make us so.

Feminism made me independent and confident that I could do anything that needed to be done.”⁸⁷ Maureen Neerli remembers, “When I left for Vietnam I was extremely shy and quiet. I would blush at the drop of a hat. After eighteen months there I was totally changed.”⁸⁸ Rene Johnson observed, “I think that most of us who went accessed an inner strength that we didn’t know before that we had and that many women went on to achieve far more than they might have otherwise had they not gone and realized how much they could do.”⁸⁹ Women’s experiences like Rene and Ann’s in Vietnam helped them realize that they were strong, independent women. For twelve to eighteen months, civilian women lived in Vietnam and survived a war without a defined front. Unlike other wars, women put themselves in danger constantly simply by being in country. They too faced an invisible enemy. Safe zones did not exist for civilians, women or men, and as a result, the distinction between civilian and soldier became meaningless. Many of these women experienced combat, even though they did not fight. As a result, they learned independence and found that they could take care of themselves.

Ann as well as other women went to Vietnam believing that the United States role was to stop the spread of communism. Most came to realize that what the United States was doing in Vietnam was wrong, especially the chemicals such as “Agent Orange” that were released over the country. Their

⁸⁷ Ann Kelsey, email to author, March 28, 2013.

⁸⁸ Walker, 129.

⁸⁹ Rene Johnson, email to author, March 28, 2013

attitudes towards the war had changed, and many became involved in activist groups that were against the United States decision to use napalm in Vietnam. Their support for the United States soldier never wavered though. Ann Kelsey states: "Vietnam totally changed my life. It made me a loner, it made me distrust my government and all politicians, it made me [choose] not to have kids and it made me stand up for myself and rely on myself and no one else."⁹⁰

Not only did these women no longer believe in their government, once they came home, they found that they too suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) like so many of the soldiers returning. Many of these women did not realize that what they experienced were forms of PTSD, and it was not until they started talking to other women who had served that they realized what they suffered from. Like the soldiers returning from war, the women too found it difficult to talk about their experiences with those who had not been there. For many women coming home, they felt like they did not belong. For Cherie Rankin, when people asked her about her time in Vietnam she did not know how to answer, "how do you tell someone it was the most wonderful and the most terrible experience of your life? I mean, you can't possibly make people understand what it was like, so you don't talk about it."⁹¹ Some women wanted to talk about their time in Vietnam but found it difficult, as no one wanted to listen. Women who had been to Vietnam either did not have anyone to talk to about their experiences or chose not to talk about it at all. They often pushed their memories back into their subconscious and tried to forget about them.

⁹⁰ Ann Kelsey, interview by author, October 5, 2009.

⁹¹ Marshall, 77.

The women who volunteered to serve in Vietnam did not identify with the evolving feminist movement. However, they did exhibit traits similar to what the feminist movement would call for. They chose to further their careers by attending college as well as become independent. Society believed women in the 1960s should marry and start a family following college. Their decision to serve in Vietnam enabled them to avoid the traditional gender role that their mother's chose. They did not resent the role of their mothers, rather they saw an opportunity to delay the role society laid out for them. Women who served in Vietnam were not entirely opposed to the domestic role, they simply wanted to delay it and experience the world, an opportunity their mothers did not have. Women who went to Vietnam were proud to take on the domestic role for the American soldier, to bring him a sense of home in order to help ease the burden and stress that they experienced in the field. After all, the reason many of these women volunteered for Vietnam was to support the troops. While it was one of the hardest times in their lives, it was also one of the most rewarding. Women who went to Vietnam went in search of something that would define them other than a domestic, a housewife. While the roles they would play were usually domestic in nature, the skills and life lessons learned in Vietnam enabled these women to become strong and independent. Women who served in Vietnam came home with the sense that they could do anything, and they could do it on their own.

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